

# Deliberative Democracy

New horizons for politics

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« I believe that old politics cannot deal anymore with the new challenges we face as a nation, from security to climate change, from global competition to growing individual aspirations, to the many needs of stronger, more secure and more sustainable communities [...]. In my opinion, we need a new kind of politics which embraces everybody, not just some chosen few. A politics built on consensus, not on division; a politics rooted in inclusiveness, not exclusion». It was not Beppe Grillo to say these words, but a Prime Minister, the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, the birthplace of modern democracy. At the general congress of the voluntary associations of September 3, 2007, Gordon Brown has spoken of the gloomy yet blunt analysis of the **diminishing level of political participation** which has been affecting his country since long: only 62% of the voters have cast their ballots at the last political elections. In the Fifties one out of 11 citizens had joined a political party, while today the average is one out of 88. Twenty years ago half of the electorate identified itself in a political party, while today only a third of it does so.

## 1. The Crisis of Politics

These few facts are enough to point out how the public distrust toward politics (perceived as self-referential) and the government capabilities are something that – besides the particularities of each country – have been affecting for many years all full-grown democracies (even those in which the costs of politics are not as high as in Italy).

If these data are inadequate, our contemporary society has to make its choices on outspokenly difficult issues (from moral, technical, and social points of view), and to deal with “thorny conflicts”: how to make use of technology (OGMs, biotechnologies, nanotechnologies, and so on), the worsening of environmental conditions (climate change, pollution), the emergence of issues of principles (euthanasia, assisted reproduction, same sex marriage, and so on). The institutional-political system addresses with great difficulty the controversial issues marked by very high levels of dispute within the society that cross-cut even the traditional divisions between the left and the right.

The proposals and suggestions aiming at addressing such a disaffection with politics by the citizens are many, yet the easiest and most direct one should consist in taking very simply democracy for what it means: let's then involve the people (*demos*), and let's give them back the power (*kratos*). In a few words: let's go back to origins. Perhaps, after more than two centuries of representative system – begun with the American Revolution – the institutions through which the democratic societies govern themselves need a “tune-up”: the political system is extremely unbalanced toward representation, and groups of interests and experts too often have too much influence, which looks incompatible with the very democratic principles. Quite often governments consider people as a problem, rather than a resource<sup>1</sup>. In contemporary democracies the citizens participation to political life too often comes down to their recurrent vote at the ballots, for sure an important and crucial success, but based on delegation. A republican vision of democracy (in the original meaning of *res publica*), on the contrary, is built on the citizens right to self-governance.

Therefore, it is necessary to re-discover democracy, to deepen it by involving all citizens straightforwardly in the *res publica*. According to these line, already in the Seventies in North America and in some European countries were born some theoretical considerations and real practices better known as “deliberative or inclusive democracy”.

The field of deliberative democracy actually is still in-progress, marked by ambiguities and uncertainties. It is not easy therefore to define its contents and qualities with precision: whoever is looking for univocal recipes would be greatly disappointed. On the one hand, this flowing situation offers fruitful ground to exploration and social creativity: it is a kind of research to which different actors give their contributions, from experts to citizens to “enlightened” administrators. Someone has called it a new social movement. In order to simplify things, it is necessary to consider three different aspects: **participation, dialogue, and deliberation.**

This article provides the readers with an assessment of the participative processes and of the different levels of power “transfer” from the institutions to the involved citizens. In the second part, it examines the characteristics of each dialogue and deliberative process, along with the participating subjects, and in the end it offers some examples of processes implemented in other countries and in Italy as well.

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1. See Stilgoe, J., *Nanodialogues. Experiments in public engagement with science*, Demos, London 2007, 18.